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WHAT SHALL THE NEGRO DO?

1. This paper is addressed directly to the colored people of the United States. A large mass of them, of course, will not see it; yet others of them will. Nothing more forcibly illustrates the great progress of our times than the fact that already one may safely count on reaching a considerable body of readers, wholly or partly of Negro blood, through the pages of a monthly publication adapted to the highest popular intelligence of the Anglo-Saxon race. The explanation of this is, that although the colored man in America enters the second quarter-century of his emancipation without yet having attained the full measure of American freedom decreed to him, he has, nevertheless, enjoyed, for at least twenty years, a larger share of private, public, religious, and political liberty than falls to the lot of any but a few peoples—the freest in the world.

It would be far from the truth to say that other men everywhere, or even that all white men, are freer than he. No subject of the Czar, be he peasant or prince, however rich in *privileges*, dares claim the *rights* actually enjoyed by an American freedman. The Negro's grievance is not that his liberties are few; it is that, in a land and nation whose measure of every man's freedom is all the freedom any one can attain without infringing upon a like freedom in others, and where all the competitions of life are keyed on this idea, his tenure of almost every public right is somehow mutilated by arbitrary discriminations against him. Not that he is in slave's shackles and between prison walls, or in a Russian's danger of them, but that, being entered in the race for the prize of American citizenship, in accordance with all the rules of the course, and being eager to run, he is first declared an inferior competitor, and then, without gain to any, but with only loss to all, is handicapped and hobbled.

Without gain to any and with loss to all. For in this con-

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test no one truly wins by another's loss; no one need lose by another's gain; the prize is for every one that reaches the goal, and the more winners there are the better for each and all. The better public citizen the Negro can be the better it will be for the white man. But the Negro's grievance is, that the discriminations made against him are more and more unbearable the better public citizen he is or tries to be; that they are impediments, not to the grovelings of his lower nature, but to the aspirations of his higher; that as long as he is content to travel and lodge as a ragamuffin, frequent the vilest places of amusement, laze about the streets, shun the public library and the best churches and colleges, and neglect every political duty of his citizenship, no white man could be much freer than he finds himself; but that the farther he rises above such life as this the more he is galled and tormented with ignominious discriminations made against him as a public citizen, both by custom and by law; and finally, that as to his mother, his wife, his sister, his daughter, these encouragements to ignoble, and discouragements to nobler, life are only crueler in their case than in his own.

2. What large enjoyment of rights, with what strange suffering of wrongs! Yet to explain the incongruity is easy; the large enjoyment of rights belongs to a new order of things, which has only partly driven out the old order, of which these wrongs are, by comparison, but a slender remnant. To explain is easy, but to remove, to remove these sad and profitless wrongs, what shall the nation do?

There are many answers. We are reminded of what the nation has done, and the record is a great one. For forty years of this nineteenth century, one of whose years counts for a score of any other century's, it made the condition of the Negro the absorbing national question, to which it sacrificed its peace and repose. Admitting much intermixture of motives of selfish power and of self-preservation, yet the fundamental matter was a moral conviction that moved the majority of the nation to refuse to hold slaves or countenance slave-holding by State legislation. To have waived this conviction would have avoided a frightful civil war. The freedom of the Negro was bought at a higher price, in white men's blood and treasure, than any people ever

paid, of their own blood and treasure, for their own liberty. Since the close of the war, many millions of dollars have been spent by private benevolence in the North to qualify the southern Negro, morally and intellectually, for his new freedom, and the outlay continues still undiminished. No equal number of people elsewhere on earth receives so great an amount of missionary educational aid. In the South itself a great change has taken—is taking—place in popular sentiment concerning certain aspects of the Negro's case. In 1885–86 over 58 per cent. of the colored school population in seven great southern States were enrolled in State public schools, in recognition of the necessity and advantage of the Negro's elevation.

These things are not enumerated to remind the Negro of his obligations. His property, as far as it goes, is taxed equally with the white man's for public education and the maintenance of the State; and all the benefactions he has received, added to all the peculations of which he stood accused in the days of his own misrule, are not yet equal to the just dues of a darker past still remaining, and that must ever remain, unpaid to him. They are enumerated not to exhaust the record, but merely to indicate the range of what has been done in the past, and is being done in the present, by white men concerning the Negro's rights and wrongs. The great national political party that first rose to power, and for almost a quarter of a century held governmental control, by its espousal and maintenance of the Negro's cause, still declares that cause a living issue in the national interest. The great party now in power, with one or more disaffected wings from the opposition, though it does not propose to do anything, as to the Negro, that has thus far been left undone, at least consents not to undo anything that has been done. Yet other important issues have been pushed to the front by both parties, and the "Negro question," however pre-eminent in the nation's true interest, is not paramount in the public attention.

But what has the Negro done? What is he doing? The trite answer is, that he has increased from four millions to seven, and is still multiplying faster by natural increase than any other race on the continent. But, also, he has accepted his freedom in the spirit of those who bestowed it; that is, limited by,

and only by, the civil and political rights and duties of American citizenship equally devoid of special privileges and special restrictions. He fought in no mean numbers in the great army that achieved his liberation, and he has laid down, since then, many a life rather than waive the rights guaranteed to him by the American Constitution. In the infancy of his citizenship, steeped in moral and intellectual ignorance, with some of his former masters disfranchised and the rest opposed to almost the whole list of his civil rights, he fell into the arms of unscrupulous leaders and covered not a few pages of history with a record of atrociously corrupt government; yet, as the present writer has lately asserted elsewhere, the freedman never by legislation removed the penalties from anything that the world at large calls a crime, and here it may be added that he never put upon the statute book a law hostile to the universal enjoyment of American liberty. In the darkest day of his power he established the public-school system. He has exceeded expectation in his display of industry, his purchase of land, his accumulation of wealth, his eagerness and capability for education, and even in his political intelligence and parliamentary skill. Even under the artificial and undiscriminating pressure of public caste he is developing social ranks with wide moral and intellectual differences, from the stupid, idle, criminal, and painfully numerous minority at the bottom, to a wealth-holding, educated minority at the top; each emerging, or half emerging, from a huge middle majority of peace-keeping, but uneducated and unskilled farmers, mechanics, and laborers, yet a majority unestranged from the more cultured and prosperous minority of their own race by any differences of religion, conflict of traditions, or rivalry of capital and labor, and hearkening to their counsels more tractably than the mass listens to the few amongst any other people on the continent. He is not open to the charges urged against the Indian or the Chinaman; he does not choose to be a savage, as the one, nor a civil alien and a heathen, as the other, is supposed to choose. He accepts education, sometimes under offensive, and sometimes under expensive, conditions. He proposes to stay in this country, and is eager to be in all things a citizen. His religion is Christianity; and if it

is often glaringly emotional and superficial, so, confessedly, is the Christianity of his betters the world over. He only shares the fault, after all, in large and gross degree, amply explained by his past and present conditions; and in many leading features a description of his faith and practice, worship and works, would differ but little from the history of religion among our white settlers of the Mississippi Valley scarcely seventy-five years ago.

3. Thus far has the nation come, and in view of these developments the old but still anxious question, What shall be done with the Negro? makes room beside it for this: What shall the Negro do? For, as matters stand, it seems only too probable that until the Negro does something further, nothing further will be done. And, indeed, are not the times and the question saying, themselves, by mute signs, that the day has come when the Negro, not the rice-field savage, but you, the educated, law-abiding, tax-paying Negro, must push more strenuously to the front in his—in your—own behalf, and thus in the behalf of all your race in the land? In particular, then, What can — what shall — the Negro do?

You can make the most of the liberty you have. You have large liberty of speech, much freedom of the press, of petition, of organization, of public meeting, liberty to hold property, to prosecute civil and criminal lawsuits, a perfect freedom to use the mails, and a certain—or must we say an uncertain—freedom of the ballot. All these are inestimable liberties, and have been, and are being, used by you. But are they being used faithfully to their utmost extent?

Freedom of public organization, for instance. From the earliest days of his emancipation the Negro has shown a zest and gift for organization, and to-day his private, public, and secret societies, which cost him money to maintain, have thousands of members. Yet only here and there among them is there a club or league for the advocacy and promotion of his civil rights. There is probably no other great national question so nearly destitute of the championship of an active national organization, with officers, treasury, and legal counsel. The causes of this are plain enough. As long as it was the supreme political issue it was left, after our American fashion, entirely to the heated

treatment of the daily press, the stump, and the national and State legislatures. From them a large part of the question passed into a long period of suspense in the Supreme Court. Only the matter of casting and counting votes kept, and keeps, the attention of parties, and this with a constant loss of power, showing that partisan treatment is no longer the question's only or chief need.

In the politics of a great nation even the greatest questions must take their turns, according as now one and now another gains the lead in the public attention, and the more sagaciously and diligently any worthy question is pressed to the front by the forces that dictate to the daily press, the stump, and the national and State legislatures, the sooner and oftener will its turn come round to lay uppermost hold upon the national conscience and policy. There always was good reason, but now there is the greatest need, that you give and get this kind of backing for the question of your civil and political rights. We say give and get, because every endeavor should be used to secure by personal solicitation not the patronage—there has been enough of that—but the friendly countenance and active co-operation of white men well known in their communities for intelligence and integrity. A certain local civil-rights club of colored men that had thought this impracticable at length tried it, and soon numbered among its active members some of the best white citizens of its town. And naturally, for it declared only such aims as any good citizen ought gladly to encourage and aid any other to seek by all lawful means.*

* After stating that any adult male citizen of the United States may become a member, it declares its object to be "to foster and promote, by every lawful use of the pen, the press, the mails, the laws, and the courts, by public assemblage and petition, and by all proper stimulation of public sentiment : 1. Both the legal and the conventional recognition, establishment, and protection of all men in the common rights of humanity and of all citizens of the United States in the full enjoyment of every civil right, without distinction on account of birth, race, or private social status. 2. The like recognition of every man's inviolable right to select and reject his social companions and acquaintances according to his own private pleasure and conscience, limited in the family relationship only by laws made under the full enjoyment of equal civil rights throughout the whole community coming under such laws ; and in the social circle only by the same inviolable right in others."

You can as urgently claim the liberty to perform all your civil duties as the liberty to enjoy all your civil rights. The two must be sought at the same time and by the same methods. They should never be divided. You must feel and declare yourself no longer the nation's, much less any political party's, still less your old master's, mere nursling; but one bound by the duties of citizenship to study, and actively to seek, all men's rights, and the public welfare of the nation, and of every lesser community—State, county, city, village—to which he belongs. Nothing else can so hasten the acquisition of all your rights as for you to make it plain that your own rights and welfare are not all you are striving for, but that you are, at least equally with the white man, the student of your individual duty toward every public question in the light of the general good. Holding this attitude, you can make many things clear, concerning the cause of civil rights, that greatly need to be made so. For instance, that this cause is not merely yours, but is a great, fundamental necessity of all free government, in which every American citizen is interested, knowing that they who neglect to defend any principle of liberty may well expect to lose its substance. Or, for another instance, that the demand for equal civil, including political, rights is by no means a demand for supremacy, much less for the supremacy of one race over another. Or, again, that this demand is not for a share in the popular power by a mass knowing and caring nothing about the popular welfare. Or, yet again, that it is not the demand of an irresponsible herd deaf to the counsels of its own intelligent few and of any other. Or, that the demand for equal unpolitical civil rights is not that public indecency and unrespectability enjoy all the rights of decency and respectability, but that mere color be not made the standard of public decency and respectability. Or, that equality in these unpolitical civil rights is urged, not for the difference in comfort, but for the effect upon the inward character of those qualified to enjoy it, and for its power to awaken, even in those yet without them, aspirations that should not be lacking in the mind of any citizen. Or, lastly, you can make it clear that the Negro is not the morally and mentally nerveless infant he was fifteen years ago.

But there is a negative side to what the Negro may do.

4. You can proclaim what you do not want. We have already implied this in what goes just before. There are tens of thousands of intelligent people who to-day unwittingly exaggerate the demands made by and in behalf of the Negro into a vast and shapeless terror. Neither he, his advocates, nor his opponents have generally realized how widely his claims have been, sometimes by and sometimes without intention, misconstrued. He needs still to make innumerable reiterations of facts that seem to him too plain for repetition; as, for example, that he does not want "Negro supremacy," or any supremacy save that of an intelligent and upright minority, ruling, out of office, by the sagacity of their counsels and their loyalty to the common good, and in office by the choice of the majority of the whole people; that, as to private society, he does not want any man's company who does not want his; or that, as to suffrage, he does not want to vote solidly, unless he must in order to maintain precious rights and duties denied to, and only to, him and all his.

There is another thing which the Negro must learn to say, and feel, that he does not want. It is hard for a white man to name it, for it is principally the fault of white men that it is hard for the Negro to say it. It is our—the white man's—fault that the only even partial outlet for the colored man from a menial public status, in the eyes of the white man, is political office. Even when he attains a learned profession he attains no such consideration as he gains in political office, superficial and tawdry though it be. Yet, self-regard has grown; scholarly callings win for him more and more regard from both whites and blacks; in the whole national mind the idea has wonderfully grown—scarcely current at all when the Negro began his political life—that public office is not the legitimate spoils of party and the legitimate reward of mere partisan loyalty and activity, to be apportioned, *pro rata*, to each and every race, class, and clique among the partisan victors; and the time has come when the Negro, for his own interest, must learn to say: "My full measure of citizenship I must and will have; but I yield no right of public office or emolument to any man because he is white, nor claim any

because I am black; and I do not want any office that does not want me." Such an attitude will win better rewards than the keeping of doors and sweeping of corridors.

But it is equally important to say that there are other things for the negro to do that must by no means be either negative or passive.

You must keep your vote alive. This means several things. It means that, without venality or servility, you must hold your vote up for the honorable competitive bid of political parties. A vote which one party can count on, as a matter of course, and the opposite party cannot hope to win at any price, need expect nothing from either. In no campaign ought the Negro to know *certainly* how he will vote before he has seen both platforms and weighed the chances of their words being made good. You will never get your rights until the white man does not know how you are going to vote. You must let him see that the "Negro vote" can divide whenever it may, and come together solidly again whenever it must.

Keeping your vote alive means, also, that while to be grateful is right and to be ungrateful is base, you must nevertheless stop voting for gratitude. The debts of gratitude are sacred, but no unwise vote can lighten them. A vote is not a free-will offering to the past; it is a debt to the present.

Again, keeping your vote alive means voting on all questions. What makes great parties if it be not the combination of men of various political interests consenting to concern themselves in one another's aims and claims for the better promotion of those designs in the order of their urgency and practicability? Now, here is the negro charged, at least, with rarely—almost never—making himself seen or heard in any widespread interest except his own. Small wonder if other men do not more hotly insist upon his vote being cast and counted. The negro may be not the first or principal one to blame in this matter, but he is largely the largest loser.

Last, keeping the vote alive means casting it. You must vote. You must practically recognize two facts, which if white men had not recognized in their own case long ago you would be in slavery still to-day: that there is an enormous value in having

votes cast; first, even though they cannot win; and, secondly, even though they are not going to be counted. A good cause and a stubborn fight are a combination almost as good as victory itself; better than victory without them; the seed of certain victory at last. Even if you have to cope with fraud, make it play its infamous part so boldly and so fast that it shall work its own disgrace and destruction, as many a time it has done before negroes ever voted. Vote! Cast your vote though taxed for it. Cast your vote though defrauded of it, as many a white man is to-day. Cast your vote though you die for it. Let no man cry, "Liberty or blood;" leave that for Socialists and Parisian mobs; but when liberty means duty, and death means one's own extinction, then the cry of "Liberty or death" is a holy cry, and the man who will not make it his own, even in freedom is not free. Seek not to buy liberty with the blood either of friends or of enemies; it is only men's own blood at last that counts in the purchase of liberty. Whatever may have been the true philosophy for more ferocious times, this is the true philosophy for ours. Cast your votes, then, even though many of you die for it. Some of you have died, but in comparison how few; three hundred thousand white men poured out their blood to keep you bound, other three hundred thousand died to set you free, and still the full measure of American freedom is not yours. A fiftieth as much of your own blood shed in the inoffensive activities of public duty will buy it. Keep your vote alive; better nine free men than ten half free. In most of the Southern States the negro vote has been diminishing steadily for years, to the profound satisfaction of those white men whose suicidal policy is to keep you in alienism. In the name of the dead, black and white, of the living, and of your children yet unborn, not as of one party or another, but as American freemen, vote! For in this free land the people that do not vote do not get and do not deserve their rights.

5. And you must spend your own money. No full use of the liberties you now have can be made without co-operation, however loose that co-operation may have to be; and no co-operation can be very wide, active, or effective without the use of money. This tax cannot be laid anywhere upon a few purses. Falling

upon many, it will rest too lightly to be counted a burden. White men may and should help to bear it; but if so, then all the more the negro must spend his own money. Half the amount now idled away on comparatively useless societies and secret orders will work wonders.

Money is essential, especially for two matters. First, for the stimulation, publication, and wide distribution of a literature of the facts, equities, and exigencies of the negro question in all its practical phases. This would naturally include a constant and diligent keeping of the whole question pruned clear of its dead matter. From nothing else has the question suffered so much, at the hands both of friends and of foes, as from lack of this kind of attention. And, secondly, money is essential for the unofficial, unpartisan, prompt, and thorough investigation and exposure of crimes against civil and political rights.

You must press the contest for equal civil rights and duties in your separate States. The claim need by no means be abated that the national government has rights and duties in the matter that have not yet been fully established; but for all that you can urge the question's recognition in State political platforms, and, having made your vote truly and honorably valuable to all parties, can bestow it where there is largest prospect of such recognition being carried into legislation and such legislation being carried into effect.

There is a strong line of cleavage already running through the white part of the population in every southern State. On one side of this line the trend of conviction is toward the establishment of the common happiness and security through the uplifting of the whole people by the widest possible distribution of moral effects and wealth-producing powers. It favors, for example, the expansion of the public-school system, and is strongest among men of professional callings and within sweep of the influence of colleges and universities. It antagonizes such peculiar institutions as the infamous convict-lease system, with that system's enormous political powers. It condemns corrupt elections at home or abroad. It revolts against the absolutism of political parties. In a word, it stands distinctively for the New South of American ideas, including the idea of material

development, as against a New South with no ideas except that of material development for the aggrandizement of the few, and the holding of the whole Negro race in the South to a servile public status, cost what it may to justice, wealth, or morals. Let the Negro, in every State and local issue, strive with a dauntless perseverance intelligently, justly, and honorably to make his vote at once too cheap and too valuable for the friends of justice and a common freedom to despise it or allow their enemies to suppress it. Remember, your power in the nation at large must always be measured almost entirely by your power in your own State.

And, finally, you must see the power and necessity of individual thought and action. It is perfectly natural that the Negro, his history being what it is, should magnify the necessity of co-operating in multitudinous numbers to effect any public result. He has not only been treated, but has treated himself too much, as a mere mass. While he has too often lacked in his organized efforts that disinterested zeal, or even that semblance of it which far-sighted shrewdness puts on, to insure wide and harmonious co-operation, he has, on the other hand, overlooked the power of the individual and the necessity of individual power to give power to numbers.

You rightly think it atrocious that you should lose your vote by its fraudulent suppression. But what can your vote when counted procure you? Legislation? Possibly. But what can legislation procure you if it is contrary to public sentiment? And how are public sentiment and action, in the main, shaped? By the supremacy of individual minds; by the powers of intellect, will, argument, and persuasion vested by nature in a few individuals here and there, holding no other commission but these powers, and every such individual worth from a hundred to a hundred thousand votes. Without this element and without its recognition there is little effective power even in organized masses. Do not wait for the mass to move. The mass waits for the movement of the individual, who cannot and will not wait for the mass. You may believe your powers to be, or they may actually be, humble; but even so, there are all degrees of leadership and need of all. There is a work to be done which it is not

which it is not in the nature of violence or votes or any mere mass power, organized or unorganized, to accomplish.

An attempt has been made here to enumerate a few of its prominent features. They are things that the negro can do so profitably & honorably to all, of whatever race, class, or region, that no white citizen can justly refuse his public, active co-operation. The times demand these things. The changes already going on in the South are just what call for promptness and vigor in this work, for they mark the supreme opportunity that lies in a formative stage of public affairs. What will the negro do?

G. W. Cable.

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